

Section 6: Setting the Stage for Children's Talk

The Purpose of Oral Language Assessments

Although we focus on assessment at the end of this course, assessments are not the endpoint of a linear teaching practice. The assessment process is a cycle of planning, teaching, assessing, reflecting, and then using the information gathered in the assessment to begin planning again.

When assessing children's talk—as with any aspect of early childhood literacy—the objective is to reveal what the children have learned and where they still need help. Good assessments identify children's strengths and weaknesses and their progress toward specific learning goals (for example, the ability to answer open-ended questions with extended answers or use basic social scripts in conversation).

Teachers can then use the information gathered through assessments to tailor their instruction to better meet the needs of individual children. For instance, a child who has trouble remembering certain rare words may need to have those words reinforced through the use of props and some one-on-one attention.

Assessments are not tests. Good assessments should be a natural extension of the language play that occurs in the classroom. If children feel that they are being tested, they may not perform up to their potential

The Process of Oral Language Assessments

The most effective way to assess children's talk is by using a combination of both formal and informal techniques, such as the following.

- *Observation/Anecdotal Notes*: The teacher observes children engaged in oral language activities, then makes brief, dated entries about their abilities and progress. Example: "11/17 – Audrey easily used the word wheelbarrow in conversation, and

told the class about how her older brother used one to clear leaves out of the driveway."

- *Narrative Language Sample*: A specific type of observational assessment of children's oral language skills involves eliciting a narrative sample from the child. You can elicit a narrative by asking children to tell a story from their own personal experience or to create a narrative from a wordless book. You can rate the extent to which their narrative: (a) included a beginning, middle, and end; (b) described characters and setting; and (c) used complex sentences, rare words, and other features of mature language users. A rating system for children's narratives is given in the Resources section.
- *Formal/Standardized Assessments*: Many formal, standardized language assessments are commercially available. When choosing a formal assessment, consider whether you need a quick screening measure to assess important language skills and determine who needs more oral language supports or a more detailed standardized diagnostic measure of all domains of language. Screening measures are often administered by classroom teachers. Standardized measures require training to administer correctly; therefore, these are most often used by education specialists.

Whether you are conducting formal or informal oral language assessments, pay special attention to children's:

- Confidence in speaking.
- Breadth and depth of responses to questions.
- Use of rare words.

Ability to communicate ideas and experiences.

The Assessment Portfolio

The results of each child's assessments should be placed in a folder with the child's name on it—an assessment portfolio. The portfolio exists as a record of the child's developing familiarity with all aspects of oral language, and is a valuable resource for lesson planning. It is also a superb reference for use in parent-teacher conferences.

Section 6 read about assessment process